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Gas Tanker Explosion Rocks Massachusetts Neighborhood

Story by
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BOSTON --

A gasoline tanker truck overturned, caught fire and exploded in Everett, Mass., early Wednesday morning, destroying several multi-family homes and forcing at least a six families and a nursing home to be evacuated.



IBS/WCVB-TV

No injuries were immediately reported but close to seven hours after the blast firefighters were still trying to extinguish a fierce blaze in one of the homes. Officials said the structure was so unstable firefighters could only battle the flames from the outside with ladder trucks and hoses.



IBS/WCVB-TV

The tanker driver was identified as Chad LaFrance, 20, of Dover, N.H. Officials said he escaped the crash with only minor injuries. He was being charged with speeding.

The trucking company LaFrance works for was identified as the Abenaki Trucking of Northampton, N.H.

The accident happened shortly before 2 a.m. on Main Street near Broadway as the truck was traveling on a rotary to Sweetser Circle.



IBS/WCVB-TV

The tanker was carrying at

least 9,000 gallons of fuel which leaked into the surrounding area, sparking fires in several nearby residences.

One Main Street resident, Chris Barrow, said he awoke to the sound of a blast.

"Just heard a big bang and we thought it was just a car accident. We went outside and the fire was already in the rotary, just coming down the hill towards the houses as fast as you could think. Our reaction at first was just to get out of the houses, and we ran and got our shoes and whatever on and we went outside," Barrow said.

"By the time we got outside, the fire was about 10 feet away from us and I jumped in my car to try to back my car out of there to try to give us some shelter when we got out of there and I didn't realize that the fire came around us and surrounded us. And I rode over the fire and my car caught on fire. I got out just in time and I ran a couple feet just before it blew up," Barrow said.

At least two multi-family homes and 20 cars caught fire. The senior housing complex nearby was evacuated and some 200 residents were evacuated to the Whittier School and then later taken to the armory on Chelsea Street.

Barrow said he got another scare when he saw another resident trying to save a car.

"I looked down the street and there was another gentleman that jumped in his car, maybe 5 or 6 cars before me, closer to the fire, and looked like he caught on fire. He was jumping around. I just heard that he was alright. It was just his jacket that caught fire," Barrow said, adding that he ran to help the man but was unable to reach him.

"We're just very lucky to be alive," he said.

"It was just a big pop. At first I thought it was a transformer. Then I looked out the window and I saw all the brightness and I called it in," one of the evacuated residents said.

"I thought it was fireworks at first. But, thank God, everybody's out, and that's the important thing," a resident of the elderly housing complex said.

"We had an occupied apartment building, approximately 80 residents, that had to be evacuated. Those residents were in danger and we were able to get everyone out of the building safely," Everett Fire Chief David Butler said.

Local streets were shut down, but state police said they hoped to have all roads opened by the morning rush hour. The accident occurred at the junction of Routes 16 and 99 at Sweetser Circle, which was expected to see significant traffic backups as the accident scene was cleared.

The maintenance man for the senior housing complex that was evacuated said he tried to help get residents out as quickly as possible.

"I saw the cars going up and I said just get everybody out of the building at this point. I ran out of the building with the fire extinguisher, but I couldn't get close enough to anybody," Tim Maloney said.

"I heard the popping, it woke me up. I looked out my window, I seen at least five cars on fire, bright orange. And then the alarms went off in the building and

everybody just cleared out of the building," evacuee Dan Savage said.

"It was very scary watching the cars go up on fire like that," he said, adding that no one could use the elevators to evacuate the high-rise complex, but everyone left the building in an orderly fashion and there was no panic.

"I'd say there was at least 15 cars that were really burning. And popping, they were popping. I don't know if it was tires that were blowing, but they were completely gone, the cars," Savage said.

A Red Cross representative said blankets and food were being provided to the evacuees who were taking shelter in the armory.

One city official said he thought there was at least a dozen families that lost their homes. He said they would not be allowed to go back to their houses for the rest of the day to get their belongings.

"It's a tragic situation, especially with this weather and the holidays coming. This is just really a nightmare at this point," Rick Milley, Everett's recreation director said.

He said merchants had stepped forward to donate food and other goods to help out the evacuees, many of whom have young children with them.

Everett Mayor John Hanlon said the residents will likely need some assistance from the community, but it was too early to determine exact totals on what they have lost.

State police Maj. Kevin Kelly said it appeared speed was a factor in the crash. He said LaFrance was going too fast and the truck tipped over. The accident remained under investigation.

The Whittier School was closed for the day and teachers were asked to report to the old Everett High School.

"I think it's a miracle that we haven't see some serious injuries," Butler said, adding that there were still environmental concerns resulting from the crash.

"We have concerns about the gas that got into the storm drains," he said.

The U.S. Coast Guard was called to help and keep an eye out for any sign of leakage into nearby waterways. They said there was no sign of any fuel sheen seen as of about 7:30 a.m., but they would take immediate action if they determined there was fuel runoff from the storm drains.

"We would take immediate measures to boom off the area," said Amy Thomas of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Everett is a city of approximately 38,000 residents just north of Boston near Boston Harbor.

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